

Abstract 654

TITLE: Needle and Syringe Acquisition Among Young Injection Drug Users in Harlem, New York City

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: In New York City purchasing or possessing a needle and syringe without a prescription is illegal. However, there are several syringe exchange programs (SEPs) in operation that can legally supply needles and syringes to injection drug users (IDUs). It is now known where most IDUs obtain and what proportion use new syringes. We examined syringe acquisition among young IDUs in Harlem where three SEPs are located.

METHODS: As part of a multi-site cohort study we interviewed streetrecruited IDUs, who were between 18 to 29 years old. Participants were asked where about acquisition and use of syringes in the past 6 months. We present results from the first 161 baseline interviews.

RESULTS: The mean age was 25 years; 72% were male; 86% were either African American or Latino; 48% were homeless; and 36% had injected for less than three years. Most persons obtained their new syringes from an SEP (43%) or a needle dealer (30%). The proportion of all syringes obtained that participants estimated were gotten from an SEP was as follows 30% (n=49) all or most, 22% (n=35) one half or less, and 48% (n=76) none. Among those who got all or most of their syringes from an SEP 14% shared syringes compared with 27% of those who got one half or less ($p<0.05$) and 25% of those who got none of their syringes from an SEP ($p<0.05$). Overall 42% (n=67) felt it was very easy to get a new syringe, 47% felt it was easy (n=76), and 11% (n=18) felt it was hard. Eleven percent of those who felt it were very easy to get syringe shared syringes compared to 28% that felt it was easy and 39% who felt it was hard ($p<0.05$). Of all participants that shared syringes (n=36) 86% reported they shared because it was the only syringe available. Overall 70% of IDUs normally do not carry a syringe with them. Additionally, 70% strongly agreed that they did not carry a syringe for fear the police would discover it.

CONCLUSION: Although SEPs are available in this neighborhood nearly half of young IDUs do not obtain syringes from this source. We found that sharing syringes was associated with not using an SEP to obtain most syringes, perceived difficulty in obtaining syringes, and when only one syringe was available for injection. Few carry syringes with them and fear of prosecution appears to be a principal factor for not carrying syringes. Increased accessibility to syringes may not only require expansion of SEP services but also changes in legal policies that prohibit use of syringes without a prescription.

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